

CHIVALRIC PILGRIMAGE AND KING ARTHUR'S COURT

Peter H. Goodrich

We all know about major Christian pilgrimage sites such as Jerusalem, Rome, Compostela, Lourdes, and Canterbury. These are concrete destinations, existing in a material universe a field of time and space. Yet they also exist in literary realms, as conceptual as well as physical places. Since pilgrimage itself has never been a strictly materialist notion, cannot such sites equally exist in imagined realms, places out of time and space, such as the Heavenly Jerusalem? And since it has long been recognized that real-world pilgrims sometimes undertake pilgrimages with secular as well as spiritual motives, can there even be corresponding lay pilgrimage sites, including imagined ones? Might we not consider King Arthur's Court as such a site? In our mundane world, where exclusionary and essentialist religious ideas clash daily with surrounding secularized cultures to murderous effect, these questions are perhaps less lightly proposed and more problematic than they may at first appear. Nevertheless, this essay proposes that the primary features defining religious pilgrimage are also fundamental to secular circumstances, that we may therefore grant a serious secular analogue to religious pilgrimage, and that such analogy extends to imaginary routes and places, including Camelot.

Let's begin with two well-known examples—one from Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, the other from Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*. In one recent study treating pilgrimage from medieval to modern manifestations, Michael York states, "A general purpose . . . is the acquisition of merit. It is most often thought to consist in the movement of focused people to a revered place" (137). Geoffrey Chaucer's Knight, fresh (or rather disheveled) from his most recent campaign, is bound with his frolicsome Squire son to Canterbury. On the initial level of the text he is no less fictional than any knight of King Arthur's court.¹ His reasons for joining the pilgrimage are to live his life according to a chivalric ideal that includes devout faith, and to demonstrate that faith not only on the battlefield but in every social venture. For him, chivalry and faith are united. His objectives include

fighting the Saracen and reclaiming the Holy Land (a goal at least as rusty and stained by this time as his equipment and appearance), and these are paralleled by his desire to worship at the shrine of St. Thomas à Becket in Canterbury. On the personal side, both endeavors aim to acquire merit, even though the one depends upon military prowess and the other upon spiritual excellence.

Yet the "revered place" of York's carefully phrased definition need not be sanctified only by an institutionalized religion. Chaucer's worthy Knight takes a break from his chivalric campaigns to visit a religious shrine, and for him it carries a dual significance. It is not just any saint's shrine, but one devoted to the memory of a brother knight—a late twelfth-century martyr whose career, death, and canonization also happened to have been coeval with the beginnings of chivalric romance.² Sir Thomas Malory's Hungarian knight, Sir Urry, is one particularly "focused person" who visits the "shrine" to another knightly system that espouses religious virtues—King Arthur's court. Wounded by Sir Alpheus in a Spanish tournament, Urry has been cursed by Alpheus's mother to have his wounds continually fester until cured by the best knight in the world. Borne in a litter from country to country, and accompanied by his own mother and sister, Urry comes at last to King Arthur at Carlisle. The supernaturally augmented nature of Urry's wound, so oddly similar to the wound of the Fisher King in the recently completed *Grail Quest*, is an affliction that requires a miracle performed by a secular hero, not a holy man. Perhaps this is because the curse comes from a witch, not a saint or God—or perhaps it is intended to underscore once again the parallel between secular and spiritual knighthood, so apparent during the *Quest* and so contested within the figure of Sir Lancelot himself. In any case, the unhealing wound does not clearly signify any spiritual lack on Urry's part, but results instead from a professional risk of the chivalric lifestyle—vengeance from the relatives of slain opponents.

Therefore, it appears unrelated to the conventional view that human affliction is a punishment for sinfulness unless we assume that the chivalric lifestyle as practiced at Camelot and other earthly courts is inherently impure—a central lesson of the *Grail Quest*. Even so, Urry's wound is no less effective in focusing his search upon secular courts than other pilgrims' illnesses are in directing them to religious shrines for cures, for it is at the hands of another knight that he has been told to seek his cure. Though profane, Arthur's court was nonetheless the earthly home of the three knights who achieved the Holy Grail. And

this point is underlined by allowing Sir Lancelot, still smarting from failure on the Grail quest and stained with adulterous though faithful love for Guinevere, to surpass even the momentarily effective King Arthur by administering that cure. If this is "cheap grace," it certainly does not seem so to those who witness the miracle—much less Lancelot, who achieves it and then weeps "as he had bene a chylde that had bene beatyn" (668).

While Urry's story is perhaps the most obvious analogue to religious pilgrimage in which Arthur's court becomes the pilgrim's "revered" objective, other instances abound of both men and women seeking out King Arthur as if his court dispensed boons by divine grace. These cases often involve exciting encounters on route to the court, analogous to the sometimes life-threatening "adventures" of common pilgrims—those material events eventually replaced by the vicarious storytelling experiences of Chaucer's pilgrims. For as Muriel Bowden memorably put it, "By the fourteenth century . . . the perilous journey of extreme hardship taken in austere ardour by the sternly pious had almost vanished from the world" (24). These other cases indicate that in terms of chivalric idealism, Camelot may best be comprehended as a secular echo and social prefiguration of the religious pilgrimage site itself.

One of the most common motives—as with Gawain, Yvain the Bastard, Tor, Lancelot, Perceval, and Galahad—is to gain the symbolic "baptism" of knighthood. (For Gawain, who is seeking his uncle, for Tor, who discovers a previously unknown father, and for Galahad, who introduces himself to a known one, it figuratively or literally involves a father-atonement profanely analogous to religious atonement with God.) The gender equity of pilgrimage, along with the ubiquity of relics associated with it, is here preserved by other boons than knighthood: for example, the Lady Lyle of Avalon's damsel visits Camelot to seek a knight capable of drawing the sword she carries from its sheath. Disappointed at not finding one worthy enough, she is given pause by the rash and violent Balin, who in Malory, despite his supposed lack of insight, nevertheless delivers a speech worthy of being cribbed from the crone in the Wife of Bath's Tale:

Worthynes and good tacches and also good dedis is nat
only in araymente, but manhode and worship [ys hid]
within a mannes person; and many a worshipfull

knyghtys nat knowyn unto all peple. And therefore
worship and hardynesse ys nat in araymente. (39)

That female pilgrims suffered the same dangers as men (and, one might add, to an even greater degree) is forcefully demonstrated by her successor in visiting the court, the Lady of the Lake. She is focused upon obtaining the head of either Balin or the damsel, only Balin promptly besmirches his newfound worship by striking off her own with the sword he has just claimed.

An even more common motive in "pilgrimages" to Arthur's court is the charge given to a defeated knight to surrender himself to the king, Guinevere, or occasionally some other court personage whom the victorious knight desires to impress. Rather than earning knightly credentials, such defeated knights are expiating some offense that has led to their defeat; consequently, the pilgrimage serves the dual purpose of recommending their conqueror and bringing them into contact with the corrective influence of exemplary courtly models. A variant of this model involves a Round Table Knight bringing a friend, like Gawain's comrade, Priamus, during the Roman campaign, or Caradoc's companion, Alardin. And yet another variant includes knights who are invited to stay, but choose not to, such as Tristram and Alexander, the son of the Emperor Alexander and lover of Soredamours. All of these cases still involve the dual measures of military prowess and spiritual excellence (individually equivocal as that pairing might be).

Perhaps the most conventional analogue to pilgrimage directs barons and kings to King Arthur to swear fealty and be installed in their possessions. Such suzerain treaties have a biblical model in the Mosaic covenant, which appears in turn to have been modeled upon the form used for ancient near eastern political alliances. Such a collective arrangement, since it is vested in the person of the leader, can readily be transferred to an individual like the pilgrim, who is prepared to venerate the powers resident at the pilgrimage site. Or it can be mediated for a group of pilgrims by the priest, who, like a baron, king, or Moses, confirms the people's covenant with the suzerain. In this sense, Arthur's court again functions as an earthly counterpart to the heavenly court of saints and angels. There at Camelot (or Winchester, or Carlisle, or any other place where the king may hold court), the suppliant obtains political merit and the signs of mutual obligation by binding himself to a higher power. Even though actual secular rulers engaged in medieval pilgrimages, here the analogy is stretched thin

owing to an obvious political expediency that does not require or necessarily lead to spiritual growth.

Yet as these examples also imply, King Arthur's court is no more the ultimate goal of the pilgrim's life than Jerusalem, Rome, Compostela, Lourdes, or Canterbury become the final resting place of the religious pilgrim. While it is true that Sir Urry, Sir Gawain, and others join the Round Table, that incorporation itself becomes the starting point for further, sustained spiritual development and quest. Thus both sacred and profane pilgrimage sites continue to function, once attained, as the locus for both individual and collective self-improvement. Adopting a term from comparative mythology, we may call them "emergence" sites, denoting a dual expansion of spiritual being and traversal outward through geographical space as both confirmation and consequence of the pilgrimage.

If the analogy between a medieval pilgrimage and emergence site such as Chaucer's Canterbury and King Arthur's court appears at least superficially apt in such varied dimensions, it should perhaps be more closely examined. In order to do this, we should ask what pilgrimages actually represented to medieval minds that may have been disposed to deprecate the connection as a heretical attempt to join separate spheres. Were pilgrimages truly understood as sites of spiritual emergence even in secular contexts?

Michael York also notes that pilgrimage exhibits both exterior or geographical and interior or metaphorical dimensions (137-38). Going on pilgrimage therefore represents liminal rites of passage between these axes as well as between roles (138-39). The pilgrim becomes known as such because he has taken on a role that mediates between the place of embarkation and the revered destination, between the everyday self and the new one that will be constituted when the pilgrimage site is achieved. Put yet another way, the movement within is simultaneously mirrored by the movement without, both sharing a redemptive purpose. What could be more characteristic of Arthurian knightly quests and of the oath that the King has the Round Table swear? Yet, as we shall see, the quests, this oath, and Camelot invariably become contested sites in Arthurian romance.

The pilgrim's liminality has been a primary focus of Victor and Edith Turner's anthropological examination of Christian pilgrimage. In their view, the pilgrim's identity is problematic (a situation common to knights in armor, if only in the dual senses that the armor may contrast the hard martial carapace with the soft fleshly body, and can equally

emblazon or obscure the identity of the person within). As. F. C. Gardiner observes in *The Pilgrimage of Desire*, this problematic identity is conventionally displayed by the pilgrim's garb, which may include such paraphernalia as stave, cap, wig, traveling cloak, wallet or knapsack, wine bottles, cope, shell or other insignia—embracing in their totality a union of opposites: the individual and the group, the commonplace and the unique, "alienation and belonging" (15). Dressed in this garb, the pilgrim signifies his liminal occupation as faring through "a land of exile towards his celestial home" (6) and as "at once separated from the fatherland, yet knowing its satisfactions during the journey through the land of exile" (18-19). The Arthurian knight's liminality is strikingly similar, not only in respect to his arms and armor, which identify him as a professional quester, but in terms of re-emergence from the fatherland of Camelot to way-fare through a land of adventure, in which foes lurk, challenges are issued, privations recur, maidens must be rescued, marvels intervene, and such infinitely iterated tests gradually construct or confirm a multidimensional chivalric identity that is as much spiritual as corporeal. All through the quest, whether to Bertilak's castle, to Corbenic, or elsewhere, the image of King Arthur's court and its satisfactions resides as referent.

For the Turners, this liminality involves four stages (Kaelber 52). First is a departure or "release from mundane structure." This is followed by a journey characterized by a leveling in station due to this separation from the pilgrim's previous life. During this journey, a communal identity begins to be forged with other pilgrims. Finally a new identity is shaped for the pilgrim in relation to a site or relic, an "encounter with the holy" that is the primary objective of the journey. Any Arthurian knight might be considered released from mundanity merely by virtue of inclusion in the legend itself, yet Perceval demonstrates this pattern exquisitely. Although his mother has done her best to shield him from the life of chivalry, he meets knights whom he first mistakes for angels, and determines to be made one of them by King Arthur (stage one). Equipped for the communal identity of knighthood only by his mother's highly selective pieces of advice, he cruelly abandons her (stage two), and literally bumbles her leveling rubrics all the way to Camelot (stage three) until Arthur knights him as much from pity and amusement as from gracious recognition of his noble birth, and he wins his arms and armor from a knight who has challenged the king's knights to chivalric combat (stage four). Lutz Kaelber differs by combining the middle two stages and adopting

another as fourth: the return (58), for Perceval's initiation does not end here. His immediate departure from Camelot, following the pattern of Balin's but with a more fortunate eventual outcome, serves as the beginning of other cycles that culminate (in the continuations of Chrétien's romance) in atonement for the abandoned mother, and successful return to the grail castle itself. In so doing, he must learn by hard adventures not to mistake the outer forms of chivalry for the redemptive inner realities.

Following John Eade and Michael Sallnow, Kaelber problematizes the Turners' influential model of pilgrimage and the very importance of shrines such as the Round Table or relics such as the Red Knight's armor. They argue that pilgrimage carries different meanings for different groups, becoming a contested activity (Kaelber 53). "The center of contention was the liminality of pilgrimage" (Kaelber 66).³ In their view as well as mine, the "boundary-work" of pilgrimage applies to many contexts. Like conventional pilgrimage, Arthurian legend contrasts those who fall short of piety with religious virtuosos such as Galahad, or the ever-handly hermits fortuitously encountered by questing knights, who follow evangelical counsels in "renouncing the world and transcending its boundaries" (56). Similarly, devotional pilgrimage for the masses, "tied to shrines and relics" (57) is exhibited not only by the many literary characters who seek out King Arthur for knighthood or fiefdoms, but by real-life aficionados who tour Arthurian sites and scour the British landscape for the "real Camelot." Surely something like the importance of a saint's physical presence or at least proximity motivates such seekers, even to the sense of "elation" and purchase of tokens and souvenirs (58).

Departing once more from King Arthur's court as an objective of pilgrimage, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* admirably illustrates Kaelber's pattern of contestation. In fact, this tale should be seen as an *anti*-pilgrimage, for Gawain departs a Christian court iconographically depicted as the summit of earthly accomplishment and idealism for the backwoods pagan shrine of the Green Chapel, whose signatory relic is the severed head. Gawain's departure from Camelot, one feels, is not only voluntary and penitential, but inscribed with all the conventional signs: confession, blessing, will-making and alms-giving, and not least of all the donning of garb and badges in the form of his lovingly detailed armor. His journey to Bertilak's castle, briefly narrated as it is, is marked by danger and hardship (though they are as nothing either in terms of narrative space or threat compared to the perils of the

boudoir). The encounter with the sacred is marked by the purchasing of tokens or souvenirs (kisses, the green girdle, and a slight nick from an ax blade), and the elation of escaping with his life. The return journey is the inverse, with Arthur's court oblivious to the meaning of his travail and wishing, like the Green Knight himself, that he would simply "lighten up."

The pleasures of this seemingly limitless liminality of pilgrimage, however, are contested by the idea that "true pilgrimage" was not to a site but to Bible scriptures (Kaelber 64). This point is driven home by the previously mentioned Gardiner and Julia Holloway, who emphasize the two formative biblical sources for pilgrimage, Exodus and the Emmaus story in the Gospel of Luke. Holloway asserts, "What is important with medieval pilgrimage poems is to remember that we are dealing with texts that intertextually enmesh themselves with the Bible and that they are playfully about theology as much as they are about poetry" (xiv-xv). Biblical intertextuality can certainly be demonstrated in the Grail legend, and more broadly in other "pilgrimages" both to and from King Arthur's court. As the Arthurian legend developed and the Christianized western world became for most of its people less about biblical than about other types of institutions and values, we have certainly become justified in viewing biblical notions of pilgrimage as themselves increasingly liminal and contested. Can the Emmaus story, extant in such liturgically centered medieval texts as the *Officium Peregrinorum* and the Townely *Peregrini* be duplicated, element for element, in a knight's or lady's pilgrimage to King Arthur? Perhaps it no longer matters, with the meaning of pilgrimage so playfully absorbed into the popular culture of many times and nations. But the contested journey still matters very much, and many more people remain wayfarers to Camelot than to Canterbury.

Northern Michigan University

Notes

¹ I say “on this level” because the entire Arthurian court and rapist knight of the Wife of Bath’s Tale is also “in the text”—but on another level. They are fictional in relation to the Knight, the Wife, and the other pilgrims because they are in a story told by a pilgrim. That there may be more than one layer of reality (or fictionality) in a text, just as the same distinction may be made between life and fiction, does not disprove my point about Chaucer’s Knight. He is no more “real” than Malory’s knights, since both are characters on the level that passes for “reality” in their authors’ fictions. Arguments that many of the pilgrims are disguised portraits of people Chaucer actually knew are also beside the point; similar claims are still being made for Arthurian figures.

² Becket would have been in his late teens at the time Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* appeared. He became Henry II’s Chancellor and later Archbishop of Canterbury. Henry, his wife Eleanor of Aquitaine, and her daughters were important patrons of literary arts; Marie de Champagne was supporting Chrétien de Troyes’s Arthurian romances at the time of Becket’s martyrdom in 1170 and canonization in 1173. Marie De France, a conjectured relative of the royal family or at least member of the court, was also producing her *lais* during this period. There is little sign, however, that either Becket or Chaucer’s Knight favored the Arthurian legend; the Knight’s Tale is a Greek romance on an Italian model.

³ However, Kaelber inserts a proviso that medieval women “often saw their religious practices not as liminal but as a continuation of their everyday lives,” in the course of which it could also be, as it was for Margery Kempe, “typically hard to obtain male approval and protection” (62).

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